State of the Lakes Ecosystem Conference (SOLEC) Opens Its Sixth Biennial Three-Day Run

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TORONTO, Canada, Oct. 6 /U.S. Newswire/ -- The complex, ever- changing Great Lakes ecosystem will be explored this week as U. S. and Canadian scientists and decision-makers from government, industry, environmental groups and academia meet at the Delta Chelsea Hotel in downtown Toronto for the sixth biennial State of the Lakes Ecosystem Conference. SOLEC runs from October 6-8, 2004.

Established in 1994 by Environment Canada and the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency, SOLEC reports on the state of the Great Lakes and on progress toward achieving the goal of the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement: to restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the waters of the Great Lakes Basin ecosystem.

"Assessing the health of something as large and complex as the ecosystem of the Great Lakes Basin is a challenge," said Pradeep Khari, Regional Director General of Environment Canada's Ontario Region. "Protecting the integrity of the Great Lakes Basin continues to be a top priority at every level of government in Canada and the U.S. The SOLEC indicators help us do this."

"The information shared and discussed at SOLEC is vital to making the right environmental management decisions for the Great Lakes," said Gary Gulezian, director of the U.S. Great Lakes National Program Office. "The success of this conference is a testimony to the priorities of our two great nations and to the thousands of individual Americans and Canadians who support this work."

The approximately 400 attendees at SOLEC 2004 will, for the first time, have the opportunity to preview information in the 2005 report prior to arriving in Toronto. This year's conference marks the introduction of nine groupings of the 81 Great Lakes indicators in relation to different issues: contamination; resource utilization; human health; land use and land cover; biotic communities; invasive species; coastal zones; aquatic habitats; and climate change.

Of these, reports will be presented on 57 of the indicators where there are data available for a report. This is up significantly from the 33 reports that were presented at SOLEC 2000 and the 43 reports presented at SOLEC 2002. These reports are used to assess the state of the Great Lakes now and into the future.

Sessions scheduled over the three days will cover a wide range of topics on the Great Lakes as a whole and individually. The latest research reveals encouraging signs of improvement, as well as problems that could devastate the system for years. Some of the issues that will be explored include:

Various mathematical models predict that climate change effects could affect the Great Lakes, possibly resulting in less water in the lakes and basin.

Forests cover 27.8 million hectares, or about half (51 percent) of the total land in the Great Lakes Basin. Total forest area appears to have increased across the Great Lakes Basin in recent decades, which should have positive effects on water quality and quantity.

Lake sturgeon, which were abundant in the Great Lakes prior to European settlement, have seen their numbers severely depleted since the late 1800s due to overfishing and pollution. Lake Sturgeon have

been absent or rare in waters where they once flourished, but are beginning to be seen again. As tributaries become more cleaner, conditions become more favorable for its recovery.

The value of coastal wetlands to the overall health of the Great Lakes is starting to be understood by scientists and managers, who have begun a series of programs to study and monitor them.

Diporeia, or scud, a small, shrimp-like creature that lives near the bottom of the Great Lakes, is an important part of the food chain and is critical for the survival of many fish species. Its populations are in dramatic decline in most Great Lakes.

As with many other areas in North America, some frog species, including the American toad, chorus frog, green from frog and northern leopard frog are showing a decline in numbers in Great Lakes wetlands.

Beach closures due to high bacteria counts continue to be a major issue throughout the basin. The number of beaches closed or posted against swimming has increased, but that is because of new monitoring programs and more sensitive procedures. The percentage of beaches posted or closed has not changed significantly since 2002, so the problem is not getting worse.

Overall, the quality of our drinking water is good, thanks to current treatment technologies.

Since the late 1970s, levels of historically regulated contaminants, such as PCB, DDT and mercury, have declined in most fish species monitored. We are watching for new contaminants like PBDE, a class of flame retardants.

The draft 2005 SOLEC report is available online at http://www.SOLECRegistration.ca.

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